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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001946

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: ELECTION ON APRIL 2. THEN WHAT?

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce reason 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The elections on Sunday will not end the political crisis. Given the lack of monitors or meaningful opposition parties, it seems likely that Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) will be able to rack up a substantial vote. However, it faces serious problems in the South, and potentially in Bangkok, getting the required 2 percent of the eligible vote for single candidate seats. If Thaksin steps down, as some people have predicted, there will still be many unresolved Constitutional problems to deal with resulting from this essentially one-party election. If he does not step down, the long period of peaceful and generally amusing demonstrations may be over, and the risk of miscalculations and provocations resulting in violence becomes much more pronounced. The EAC has reviewed our security posture, and our Consular Information Sheets give appropriate warnings. Septel provides suggested press guidance. We will use contacts with security officials and protesters to urge that all sides exercise maximum restraint and avoid violence during this volatile time. End summary.

12. (C) The elections on Sunday will not end the political crisis gripping Thailand; they are just the next pivot point for this long-running drama. Many of the possible scenarios for the next few weeks are not very appealing. For the past several months, through waves of huge demonstrations, the Thai -- both demonstrators and police -- have shown admirable restraint and commitment to peaceful protest. We should be prepared for the possibility that this will change as both the Prime Minister and his opponents become more desperate to end the uncertainty, and win.

13. (C) First, a quick look at what the election will and will not tell us. We will probably see preliminary election results Monday, but the Election Commission (EC) will likely require weeks or even months to investigate and resolve fraud charges. Each side will try to spin the results to its advantage, but opposition to Thaksin will not be dampened even in the face of a large vote in his favor.

COUNTING THE BALLOTS

14. (C) Many analysts are speculating about what it will 'mean' if TRT gets a million more votes than the 19 million it got in 2005, or a million less. In reality, TRT should be able to rack up hefty totals in the countryside. There are about 45 million total registered voters. About 15 million of them live in the northeast, and about another 8 million in the north, both areas where local officials, at least, seem to be solidly behind Thaksin. There will be no independent observers (the local poll monitoring organization is also boycotting), and no genuine opposition parties to monitor the

vote. We have already seen the lengths to which some Thaksin supporters will go in this election -- about a third of the candidates who registered were disqualified, many for blatant fraud in which TRT members are likely to be implicated. The northeast and north are prone to voter fraud already (the Northeast is known as the area where "the voters stay bought"). With no monitoring, the sky is really the limit. Under such circumstances, almost everyone expects TRT to do extremely well in these areas.

14. (C) Greater Bangkok (7 million voters) and the South (6 million voters) will pose stiffer challenges for TRT, as polling place personnel and local officials are more likely to be Thaksin opponents. But there will still be no official monitoring, and the integrity of the process will depend on the commitment of the election officials. The Bangkok vote is difficult to predict, as many people here are recently from the northeast or other rural areas, and their sympathies may lie with their rural roots. There may also be lurking resentment at the middle class and student-oriented protests that have rocked Bangkok for weeks. TRT ran well in Bangkok just a year ago, capturing most of the seats. In the far South, TRT does not seem to be even trying to turn out the vote, and it made an even worse showing in the mid-South in 2005, getting less than 20 percent of the vote in most districts. Greater Bangkok and the South have over 120 seats, for many of which there is only one candidate. These are the areas most likely to provoke a constitutional dilemma: what to do if the voting does not produce all 500 MPs required?

WILL THAKSIN STEP DOWN?

15. (C) The first question on everyone's mind Monday morning will be: is Thaksin going to step down? The media has been

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full of hints that he is considering 'taking a break' and some TRT members and officials predict he will follow through. At this point, Thaksin himself probably doesn't know what he'll do after the vote. Unfortunately, even if he steps down, there are still many problems in store. He may be planning a very short break indeed -- just a few months to permit constitutional reform, and then new elections. This offer is unlikely to satisfy the demonstrators. Even if Thaksin is ready to step down for a longer period, the question will arise, what about these April 2 elections? No one discussing post-election scenarios has really dealt with that question. One logical solution if Thaksin steps down would be to toss out the results of the April 2 vote and start over, giving the opposition parties time to regroup and participate. However, the expense and effort make this a tough option to choose. Declare the elections void and reconstitute the old Parliament? Also a difficult choice.

OR WILL HE TOUGH IT OUT?

16. (C) If Thaksin decides to fight on, then there will be a wrenching process with seating the newly-elected Parliament. If, as expected, the election does not produce 500 winners, the EC has said that the question will have to go to the Constitutional Court, to see if the Parliament can be seated without the full quota of 500. In a similar situation five years ago, the Court ruled that the Senate had to have all 200 members before it could convene. Nonetheless, this Court has a reputation for falling in line with the PM's interests. Thus, it is possible that, after several re-votes fail to produce a legitimate winner, Thailand will have a House of Representatives composed almost exclusively of TRT members.

IS THE PARTY OVER?

17. (C) The opposition to Thaksin is tired, but they are not running out of steam. The demonstrations are getting bigger,

and our contacts in the countryside indicate that they are making some headway even in the cities and towns of the TRT strongholds. If the PM tries to dig in after the elections, the anti-Thaksin demonstrators will assuredly be back on the streets again.

18. (C) Until now, the anti-Thaksin PAD (People's Alliance for Democracy) has been impressively disciplined and organized; their demonstrations have generally been cheerful, family affairs with a festive atmosphere. They have cultivated good contacts with the police. They have also had almost a complete monopoly on demonstrating -- there has been remarkably little protest activity outside the framework of the PAD. But this could change if Thaksin does not step down. Particularly in Bangkok, tensions are high and nerves are frayed. There will be at least a few who will be inclined to employ more confrontational methods.

19. (C) During the past week, we saw several previews of demonstrations that could have provoked a violent response. In Bangkok, a group of students dumped trash in front of the TRT party headquarters in the middle of the night. Farmers seeking debt relief blockaded a bank and the PAD blockaded the Electoral Commission headquarters. In Chiang Mai, violence actually broke out on Thursday, when pro-Thaksin supporters blocked the roads to prevent a Democrat Party rally, and then disrupted the meeting with jeers, throwing rotten eggs, and eventually driving the Democrat leader off the stage and back to the airport. A small bomb was also found at Democrat Party headquarters in Bangkok earlier this week.

110. (C) The police and military have so far refrained from intervening to arrest peaceful protesters, despite some threats from the government that it would like to do so. After the election, the pressure on police to arrest demonstrators is likely to increase greatly, as Thaksin struggles to reassert control over the capital. The government has also announced that it has videotaped protest speeches and will prepare to bring criminal defamation charges against the speakers. Efforts to arrest the charismatic demonstration leaders or peaceful demonstrators, or a heavy-handed police response to rowdy students -- any of these options could provoke a violent response. Without wanting to sound alarmist, there is a very real risk in the next few weeks that the situation could deteriorate fairly quickly.

ACTION ITEMS

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111. (C) We plan to convene the EAC after the elections, and as often as necessary, to review our security posture. However, there are no signs of any anti-American element to the demonstrations. In addition:

-- We have reviewed the Consular Information Sheet and warden messages, which advise travelers to avoid crowds and demonstrations. We believe that this advice is still appropriate.

-- We have prepared press guidance (septel) for use immediately after the election, if we are called upon to comment.

-- Post will continue to use contacts with security forces, opposition groups and government officials to underscore the need for restraint and the use of only peaceful means in resolving the conflict.

COMMENT

12: (C) It is generally believed here (rightly or not) that

if violence breaks out and people are injured or killed, Thaksin will have to step down. Since Thaksin and his stalwarts understand this, they have a compelling reason to avoid violence. Even so, Thaksin himself may not be able to control the forces supporting him. The incident at the Democrat rally in Chiang Mai could easily have resulted in serious injuries or worse. The anti-Thaksin forces have also whipped up strong feelings they may be unable to contain. There are still optimists who believe that Thaksin will find a way to make a graceful exit after April 2, or that the Palace will intervene in the event that he stubbornly refuses to go. Two things appear certain: 1) the election, which many saw as a 50/50 proposition only a couple of weeks ago, will almost certainly proceed as scheduled on April 2; and 2) the period after the election will be tense. The protests to date have been remarkably peaceful, given the stakes. But it's unlikely to remain that way indefinitely.

BOYCE